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# What the public should know

It could well be the endless and unsolvable issue of this day and the days to come — this matter of just how much the Freedom of Information Act allows digging into national-security and police-intelligence files.

The fire was rekindled last week by the U. S. Supreme Court's decision that the CIA had a right to deny certain information in protection of its intelligence sources.

The 7-to-2 decision brought a fast retort from freedom of information forces, a very vocal group that, on prior occasions, has used the Freedom of Information Act and stood in defense of the people's right to know — almost everything.

I probably will be branded a heretic to be burned at the most convenient stake, but I belong to an old-fashioned school that always thought that security intelligence was supposed to be secret. I always have thought that's what it is all about.

Operatives and informants are supposed to remain faceless and anony-

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mous. To lose their cover means to lose the mission — and their lives. Even the Ralph Naderish vigilantes should accept that.

I have heard the much-said line that if you give the CIA and FBI a secretive inch, they will take an arrogant mile. I don't believe it, nor did the Supreme Court.

Chief Justice Warren Burger, in writing the latest majority opinion protecting the CIA from certain freedom of information scouting, said the CIA is "not required to show that a particular intelligence source was promised anonymity or that national security is at stake directly if a source's identity is not revealed."

"Congress intended to give the director of central intelligence broad power to protect the secrecy and integrity of the intelligence process," he wrote. "The reasons are too obvious to call for enlarged discussion. Without such protection, the agency would be virtually impotent."

Precisely, Chief Justice Burger. But Congress also intended that the CIA, FBI or any other agency should act and perform at the highest level of

integrity and should not use the secrecy shield to violate the intent and purpose of a right to know act.

Frivolous or veiled use of the Freedom of Information Act could be disastrous for intelligence and domestic law enforcement agencies. The law is not designed solely for prying journalists. It can be invoked by others who seek information — and that is where certain dangers arise.

It does not make sense that a foreign enemy, working through trickery and fakery, could gain an FOI admission ticket, go to the CIA and demand information from its files. The law was not intended to leave such loopholes — and maybe it should be amended to prevent such misuse.

The case that precipitated the Supreme Court decision was not too savory. But the court ruling was more on the basic intent of protection of intelligence operations than on case specifics. The people's right to know is a precious right. It is a strong bridle for government agencies that would abuse power. But, again, the people are not entitled to know everything. Confidentiality is a keystone of good intelligence operations. The problem simmers down to the need for constructive repair work on both sides of the coin.